

(Ste. Genevieve News Herald) Every five years Congress authorizes a comprehensive bill that sets federal farm policy and programs. In 2002 Congress passed The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (better known as the 2002 Farm Bill). That legislation is scheduled to expire in just over a year, on September 30, 2007.

Early next month Ste. Genevieve County farmers and agricultural interests from the Southeast Missouri Region will have a unique opportunity to have a say in what they think the next farm bill should—and should not—include. The discussion, which will take place at an informal hearing conducted by a key member of the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, could help determine the future of American agriculture and the well-being of farmers in this county.

The scheduling of the field hearing in Ste. Genevieve County is a first. Third District Congressman Russ Carnahan (D-St. Louis) is primarily responsible for making it happen.

“The new farm bill is of major importance, not just for the next five years, but for the future of agriculture, especially when it comes to small farmers,” Carnahan said last week in announcing the session. “The best way to get it right is to hear from the people who will be impacted most. I feel it is extremely appropriate for this field hearing to take place in Ste. Genevieve, where agriculture is still a vital economic activity, and where small family farms are alive and well .”

Although Carnahan does not serve on the House Agriculture Committee, he has been a proponent of agriculture interests. In a vote against CAFTA (Central America Free Trade Agreement) in 2005 he cited “blatant deficiencies re-garding...our agriculture interests,” as among the most important reasons for his opposition. He voted for the Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2006, which included provisions for funding for most of the nation’s farm conservation programs and a variety of rural development programs.

The session will be held on October 4 in the meeting room of the Ste. Genevieve County Community Center. It will be conducted by Collin C. Peterson (D-Minnesota), the ranking

Minority member of the House Agriculture Committee.

The time is tentatively set for 9 a.m., with the doors opening at 8:30 a.m. The public is invited. “Congressmen Carnahan knows this is an issue of high interest here,” Carnahan aide Kathleen Waltz said. “Both Congressman Carnahan and Congressman Peterson are hoping to have many, many people from our own community and Southeast Missouri at the meeting. We’ll make room for everyone who wants to attend.”

Creating Federal Farm Policy

Federal officials have been holding hearings on what should be included in a new farm bill since last year, gathering data and information and sounding the political waters. (Information from those hearings is now available through connections with the USDA website at www.usda.gov) . The current round of sessions—including the one in Ste. Genevieve—are the prelude to the House Agriculture Committee actually writing a bill, with work likely to begin early next year. It won’t be an easy job.

Farm policy is always one of the most complex issues addressed by the U.S. Congress, and the development of a farm bill that adequately deals with changing circumstances and wide-ranging interests is anything but simple. Congressional leaders know that—as evidenced by a statement made by U.S. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Virginia) when the current round of hearings began in Washington, D.C. last month—and they recognize the importance of input from the agriculture community.

“There are many factors that influence agriculture, from weather to trade agreements to government regulations and input costs,” Goodlatte said. “American agriculture is a dynamic sector that is constantly changing and evolving. Our farm policy needs to accommodate for these changes and the evolution of our agriculture sector. The feedback we gather from those working within agriculture will help us determine what issues need to be addressed and how to go about addressing them.”

According to some experts, however, key federal officials have already decided that significant change is needed in how farm issues are defined and addressed. The Bush Administration has been pushing for a major overhaul of U.S. farm legislation as embodied in the 2002 Farm Bill.

Those who want to see a new approach charge that the 2002 Farm Bill is stalling World Trade Organization (WTO) trade negotiations and making the U.S. vulnerable to legal action from other countries. And while everyone—politicians, the business community, economists and farmers—seem to agree on the importance of international ag trade, there is far less agreement

on how to maximize its benefits or on who should bear the burden (if any) of doing so. The level of federal spending defined in the 2002 Farm Bill also has been targeted. Immediately following the very first of the “second-round” discussions of the bill Goodlatte issued a statement in which he said that Congress “must be realistic in our planning and anticipate the likelihood that agricultural spending will not grow but may remain the same or decrease from the 2002 levels.” He added that the new bill also should “recognize that the number of groups with a vested interest in those agriculture spending dollars is increasing daily.”

“The result is that the pie, whether it is the same size as 2002 or a bit smaller, will have to be divided up between a larger number of players,” Goodlatte said. “This means that we will have to be creative in how we approach the next farm bill to ensure that all involved in American agriculture are equipped with what they need to continue their operations.”

Proposals made for cutting farm spending and complying with WTO requirements include the elimination of export subsidies in agriculture, cuts in agricultural tariffs and reductions in what proponents of the 2007 proposals call “trade-distorting” domestic subsidies from a ceiling of \$19.1 billion annually to about \$7.6 billion.

Not surprisingly, there has been opposition to changes that could strip farmers of benefits. Critics of those proposals say the changes may not be enough to satisfy other WTO members, and add that the cuts also could potentially increase the risk for agriculture by reducing the market risk protection currently provided by U.S. farm policy.

As the arguments are being waged, some groups have mounted efforts to extend the old farm bill, at least on a temporary basis. (For example, the American Farm Bureau wants a one-year extension of the current farm bill so that a number of issues that are presently in contention can be addressed.) But reform is in the political wind, and no one is betting that will happen. However Kent Thiesse, a government farm programs analyst and retired Professor Emeritus and Extension Educator from the University of Minnesota, recently made some guesses about what the next few months will hold.

“There will be a lot of discussion regarding the new farm bill in the coming months...as the U.S. House and Senate continue to hold farm bill hearings,” Thiesse wrote in a recent essay. “Some of the issues related to the new farm bill are also likely to be discussed during the campaigns for U.S. Senate and Congressional seats, especially in the Midwest and other agriculture-based states. The ongoing WTO negotiations will also likely impact discussions relative to a new farm bill. Some members of Congress and some farm organizations will continue to push for an extension of the current farm bill for one or more years, especially if WTO negotiations stall out in the coming months. No decisions relative to new farm bill provisions or timelines, or possible extension of the current farm bill, are likely to occur until after the November Congressional elections, and until the new Congress is in session after January 1, 2007.”

The goal, of course, will be the adoption of a new farm bill or the extension of the existing legislation before next September.

“The new farm bill probably won’t be the old farm bill,” Extension Community Development Specialist Tish Johnson said. “But we are very appreciative of the opportunity for local farmers and producers to have input into the process.”

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